Good Question Good Answer

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Preface to Fourth Revised Edition

Some 18 years ago a group of Buddhist students from Singapore University came to see me complaining that they often found it difficult answering questions about Buddhism that people sometimes put to them. I asked them to give examples of some of these questions and when they did, I was shocked that bright, well-educated young Buddhists should know so little about their religion and be so hesitant about explaining it to others. I took note of many of the questions, added some that I was often asked and thus ***Good Question Good Answer*** came into being. What was meant to be of use mainly for Singaporeans has, to my surprise and satisfaction, gone on to have an international readership. Over 150,000 copies of the English edition have been printed and it has been reprinted numerous times in the USA, Malaysia, India, Thailand and Sri Lanka. It has also been translated into 14 languages, most recently into Bhasa Indonesia and Spanish. In this fourth updated and enlarged edition I have added some more questions and have provided, I hope, good answers to them. I have also added a chapter containing some sayings of the Buddha. May this little book continue to stimulate an interest in the Buddha's Dhamma.

S. Dhammika

Singapore, 2005

1. What is Buddhism?

Question: What is Buddhism?
Answer: The name Buddhism comes from the word *budhi* which means 'to wake up' and thus Buddhism can be said to be the philosophy of awakening. This philosophy has its origins in the experience of the man Siddhattha Gotama, known as the Buddha, who was himself awakened at the age of 35. Buddhism is now 2,500 years old and has about 300 million followers worldwide. Until a hundred years ago Buddhism was mainly an Asian philosophy but increasingly it is gaining adherents in Europe, Australia and America.

Question: So Buddhism is just a philosophy?
Answer: The word philosophy comes from two words *philo,* which means 'love', and *sophia* which means 'wisdom'. So philosophy is the love of wisdom or love and wisdom, both meanings describe Buddhism perfectly. Buddhism teaches that we should try to develop our intellectual ability to the fullest so that we can understand clearly. It also teaches us to develop love and kindness so that we can be like a true friend to all beings. So Buddhism is a philosophy but not just a philosophy. It is the supreme philosophy.

Question: Who was the Buddha?
Answer: In the year 563 BC a baby was born into a royal family in northern India. He grew up in wealth and luxury but eventually found that worldly comforts and security do not guarantee happiness. He was deeply moved by the suffering he saw all around and resolved to find the key to human happiness. When he was 29 he left his wife and child and set off to sit at the feet of the great religious teachers of the day and to learn from them. They taught him much but none really knew the cause of human suffering and how it could be overcome. Eventually, after six years study, struggle and meditation he had an experience in which all ignorance fell away and he suddenly understood. From that day onwards he was called the Buddha, the Awakened One. He lived for another 45 years during which time he traveled all over the north-

ern India teaching others what he had discovered. His compassion and patience were legendary and he had thousands of followers. In his 80th year, old and sick, but still dignified and serene, he finally died.

QUESTION: Wasn't it irresponsible for the Buddha to walk out on his wife and child?
ANSWER: It couldn't have been an easy thing for the Buddha to leave his family. He must have worried and hesitated for a long time before he finally left. But he had a choice, dedicating himself to his family or dedicating himself to the world. In the end, his great compassion made him give himself to the whole world and the whole world still benefits from his sacrifice. This was not irresponsible. It was perhaps the most significant sacrifice ever made.

QUESTION: If the Buddha is dead how can he help us?
ANSWER: Faraday who discovered electricity is dead, but what he discovered still helps us. Luis Pasteur who found the cures for so many diseases is also dead, but his medical discoveries still save lives. Leonardo da Vinci who created masterpieces of art is dead, but what he created can still uplift the heart and give joy. Great heroes and heroines may have been dead for centuries but when we read of their deeds and achievements we can still be inspired to act as they did. Yes, the Buddha passed away but 2,500 years later his teachings still help people, his example still inspires people, his words still change lives. Only a Buddha could have such power centuries after his passing.

QUESTION: Was the Buddha a god?
ANSWER: No he was not. He did not claim that he was a god, the child of a god or even the messenger from a god. He was a human being who perfected himself and taught that if we follow his example we could perfect ourselves also.

QUESTION: If the Buddha is not a god why do people worship him?
ANSWER: There are different types of worship. When someone worships a god, they praise him or her, make offerings and ask for favors,

believing that the god will hear their praise, receive their offerings and answer their prayers. Buddhists do not practice this kind of worship. The other kind of worship is when we show respect to someone or something we admire. When a teacher walks into a room we stand up, when we meet a dignitary we shake hands, when the national anthem is played we salute. These are all gestures of respect and worship and indicate our admiration for a specific person and thing. This is the type of worship Buddhist practice. A statue of the Buddha with its hands rested gently in its lap and its compassionate smile reminds us to strive to develop peace and love within ourselves. The perfume of incense reminds us of the pervading influence of virtue, the lamp reminds us of the light of knowledge and the flowers, which soon fade and die, reminds us of impermanence. When we bow we express our gratitude to the Buddha for what his teachings have given us. This is the meaning of Buddhist worship.

Question: But I have heard people say that Buddhists worship idols.
Answer: Such statements only reflect the misunderstanding of the persons who make them. The dictionary defines an idol as 'an image or statue worshipped as a god.' As we have seen, Buddhists do not believe that the Buddha was a god, so how could they possibly believe that a piece of wood or metal is a god? All religions use symbols to represent their various beliefs. In Taoism, the *ying-yang* diagram is used to symbolize the harmony between opposites. In Sikhism, the sword is used to symbolize spiritual struggle. In Christianity, the fish is used to symbolize Christ's presence and a cross to represent his sacrifice. In Buddhism, the statue of the Buddha reminds us of the human dimension in Buddhist teaching, the fact that Buddhism is human-centered rather than god-centered, that we must look within, not without to find perfection and understanding. Therefore, to say that Buddhist worship idols is as silly as saying that Christians worship fish or geometrical shaped.

Question: Why do people do all kinds of strange things in Buddhist temples?
Answer: Many things seem strange to us when we don't understand

them. Rather than dismiss such things as strange, we should try to find their meaning. However, it is true that some of the things Buddhists do have their origin in popular superstition and misunderstanding rather than the teaching of the Buddha. And such misunderstandings are not found in Buddhism alone but creep into in all religions from time to time. The Buddha taught with clarity and in detail and if some people fail to understand fully, he cannot be blamed for that. There is a saying from the Buddhist scriptures:

> *'If a person suffering from a disease does not seek treatment even when there is a physician at hand, it is not the fault of the physician. In the same way, if a person is oppressed and tormented by the disease of the defilement's but does not seek the help of the Buddha, that is not the Buddha's fault'* Jn. 28-9

Nor should Buddhism or any religion be judged by those who don't practice it properly. If you wish to know the real teachings of Buddhism, read the Buddha's words or speak to those who understand them properly.

QUESTION: Is there a Buddhist equivalent of Christmas?
ANSWER: According to tradition, Prince Siddhattha was born, became the Buddha and passed away on the full moon day of Vesakha, the second month of the Indian year which corresponds to April–May of the Western calendar. On that day Buddhists in all lands celebrate these events by visiting temples, participating in various ceremonies or perhaps spending the day meditating.

QUESTION: If Buddhism is so good why are some Buddhist countries poor?
ANSWER: If by poor you mean economically poor, then it is true that some Buddhist countries are poor. But if by poor you mean a poor quality of life, then perhaps some Buddhist countries are quite rich. America for example, is an economically rich and powerful country but the crime rate is one of the highest in the world, millions of elderly people are neglected by their children and die of loneliness in old people's

homes, domestic violence, child abuse, drug addiction is a major problem and one in three marriages end in divorce. Rich in terms of money but perhaps poor in terms of the quality of life. Now if you look at some traditional Buddhist countries you find a very different situation. Parents are honored and respected by their children, the crime rates are relatively low, divorce and suicide are rare and traditional values like gentleness, generosity, hospitality to strangers, tolerance and respect for others are still strong. Economically backward but perhaps a higher quality of life than a country like America. However, even if we judge Buddhist countries in terms of economics alone, one of the wealthiest and most economically dynamic countries in the world today is Japan where a good percentage of the population call themselves Buddhist.

Question: Why is it that you don't often hear of charitable work being done by Buddhists?
Answer: Perhaps it is because Buddhists don't feel the need to boast about the good they do. Several years ago the Japanese Buddhist leader Nikkho Nirwano received the Templeton Prize for his work in promoting inter-religious harmony. Likewise a Thai Buddhist monk was recently awarded the prestigious Magsaysay Prize for his excellent work among drug addicts. In 1987 another Thai monk, Ven. Kantayapiwat was awarded the Norwegian Children's Peace Prize for his many years of work helping homeless children in rural areas. And what about the large scale social work being done among the poor in India by the Western Buddhist Order? They have built schools, child-minding centers, dispensaries and small-scale industries for self-sufficiency. Buddhist see help given to others as an expression of their religious practice just as other religions do but they believe that it should be done quietly and without self-promotion.

Question: Why are there so many different types of Buddhism?
Answer: There are many different types of sugar – brown sugar, white sugar, rock sugar, syrup and icing sugar but it is all sugar and it all tastes sweet. It is produced in different forms so that it can be used in different ways. Buddhism is the same: there is Theravada

Buddhism, Zen Buddhism, Pure Land Buddhism, Yogacara Buddhism and Vajrayana Buddhism but it is all the teachings of the Buddha and it all has the same taste – the taste of freedom. Buddhism has evolved into different forms so that it can be relevant to the different cultures in which it exists. It has been reinterpreted over the centuries so that it can remain relevant to each new generation. Outwardly, the types of Buddhism may seem very different but at the center of all of them is the Four Noble Truths and the Eightfold Path. All major religions, Buddhism included, have split into schools and sects. Perhaps the difference between Buddhism and some other religions is that the different various schools have always been very tolerant and friendly towards each other.

Question: You certainly think highly of Buddhism. I suppose you believe it is the only true religion and that all the others are false.
Answer: No Buddhist who understands the Buddha's teaching thinks that other religions are wrong. No one who has made a genuine effort to examine other religions with an open mind could think like that either. The first thing you notice when you study the different religions is just how much they have in common. All religions acknowledge that humankind's present state is unsatisfactory. All believe that a change of attitude and behavior is needed if the human situation is to improve. All teach an ethics that includes love, kindness, patience, generosity and social responsibility and all accept the existence of some form of Absolute. They use different languages, different names and different symbols to describe and explain these things. It is only when people cling narrow-mindedly to their particular way of seeing things that intolerance, pride and self-righteousness arise.

Imagine an Englishman, a Frenchman, a Chinese and an Indonesian all looking at a cup. The Englishman says, 'That is a cup.' The Frenchman answers, 'No it's not. It's a *tasse*.' Then the Chinese comments, 'You are both wrong. It's a *pei*.' Finally the Indonesian man laughs at the others and says 'What fools you are. It's a *cawan*.' Then the Englishman get a dictionary and shows it to the others saying, 'I can prove that it is a cup. My dictionary says so.' 'Then your dictionary is wrong,' says the

Frenchman, 'because my dictionary clearly says it is a *tasse*.' The Chinese scoffs; 'My dictionary says it's a *pei* and my dictionary is thousands of years older than yours so it must be right. And besides, more people speak Chinese than any other language, so it must be a *pei*.' While they are squabbling and arguing with each other, a another man comes up, drinks from the cup and then says to the others, 'Whether you call it a cup, a *tasse*, a *pei* or a *cawan*, the purpose of the cup is to hold water so that it can be drunk. Stop arguing and drink, stop squabbling and refresh your thirst.' This is the Buddhist attitude to other religions.

Question: Some people say, 'All religions are really the same.' Would you agree with them?

Answer: Religion is a phenomena far too complex and diverse to be encapsulated by a neat little statement like that. A Buddhist might say that this statement contains element of both falseness and truth. Buddhism teaches that there is no god while Christianity, for example, teaches that there is. I think that this is quite an important difference. However, one of the most beautiful passages in the Bible says;

> *'If I speak the languages of men and angels but have no love, I am only a noisy gong or a clanging symbol. If I have the gift of prophecy and can understand all mysteries and all knowledge, and if I have faith so strong that it can move a mountain, but I have no love, I am nothing. If I give all I possess to the poor and even surrender my body to the flames but I have no love, I gain nothing. Love is patient, love is kind. It does not envy, it dose not boast, it is not proud. Love is not rude, it is not self-seeking, it is not easily angered, it keeps no record of wrongs done. Love does not delight in evil but rejoices in the truth. It always protects, always trusts, always perseveres.'* I Cor.13-7

This is exactly what Buddhism teaches – that the quality of our heart is more important than any super-normal powers we might have, our ability to foretell the future, the strength of our faith or any extravagant gestures we might make. So when it comes to theological concepts and theories Buddhism and Christianity certainly differ. But when it comes to heart-qualities, ethics and behavior they are very similar.

Question: Is Buddhism scientific?

Answer: Before we answer that question it would be best to define the word 'science.' Science is, according to the dictionary, 'knowledge which can be made into a system, which depends upon seeing and testing facts and stating general natural laws, a branch of such knowledge, anything that can be studied exactly.' There are aspects of Buddhism that would not fit into this definition but the central teachings of Buddhism, the Four Noble Truths, most certainly would. Suffering, the First Noble Truth, is an experience that can be defined, experienced and measured. The Second Noble Truth states that suffering has a natural cause, craving, which likewise can be defined, experienced and measured. No attempt is made to explain suffering in terms of a metaphysical concept or myths. According to the Third Noble Truth, suffering is ended, not by relying on upon a supreme being, by faith or by prayers but simply by removing its cause. This is axiomatic. The Fourth Noble Truth, the way to end suffering, once again, has nothing to do with metaphysics but depends on behaving in specific ways. And once again behavior is open to testing. Buddhism dispenses with the concept of a supreme being, as does science, and explains the origins and workings of the universe in terms of natural laws. All of this certainly exhibits a scientific spirit. Once again, the Buddha's constant advice that we should not blindly believe but rather question, examine, inquire and rely on our own experience, has a definite scientific ring to it. In his famous Kalama Sutta the Buddha says;

> *'Do not go by revelation or tradition, do not go by rumor or the sacred scriptures, do not go by hearsay or mere logic, do not go by bias towards a notion or by another person's seeming ability and do not go by the idea "He is our teacher." But when you yourself know that a thing is good, that it is not blamable, that it is praised by the wise and when practiced and observed that it leads to happiness, then follow that thing.'* A.I,188

So we could say that although Buddhism in not entirely scientific, it certainly has a strong scientific overtone and is certainly more scientific than any other religion. It is significant that Albert Einstein, the greatest

scientist of the 20th century said of Buddhism:

> *'The religion of the future will be a cosmic religion. It should transcend a personal God and avoid dogmas and theology. Covering both natural and spiritual, it should be based on a religious sense arising from the experience of all things, natural and spiritual and a meaningful unity. Buddhism answers this description. If there is any religion that would cope with modern scientific needs, it would be Buddhism.'*

QUESTION: I have sometimes heard the Buddha's teachings called the Middle Way. What does this term mean?
ANSWER: The Buddha gave his Noble Eightfold Path an alternative name, *majjhima patipada,* which means 'the Middle Way.' This is a very important name because it suggests to us that it is not enough to just follow the Path, but that we have to follow it in a particular way. People can become very rigid about religious rules and practices and end up becoming real fanatics. In Buddhism the rules have to be followed and the practice done in a balanced and reasonably way that avoids extremism and excess. The ancient Romans used to say 'Moderation in all things' and Buddhists would agree with this completely.

QUESTION: I read that Buddhism is just a type of Hinduism. Is this true?
ANSWER: No it is not. Buddhism and Hinduism share many ethical ideas, they use some common terminology like the words kamma, samadhi and nirvana and they both originated in India. This has led some people to think that they are the same or very similar. But when we look beyond the superficial similarities we see that the two religions are distinctly different. For example Hindus believe in a supreme God while Buddhists do not. One of the central teachings of Hindu social philosophy is the idea of caste, which Buddhism firmly rejects. Ritual purification is an important practice in Hinduism but it has no place in Buddhism. In the Buddhist scriptures the Buddha is often portrayed as criticizing what the brahmins, the Hindu priests, taught and they

were very critical of some of his ideas. This would not have happened if Buddhism and Hinduism were the same.

Question: But the Buddha did copy the idea of kamma from Hinduism didn't he?
Answer: Hinduism does teach a doctrine of kamma and also reincarnation. However, their versions of both these teachings are very different from the Buddhist versions. For example, Hinduism says we are determined by our kamma while Buddhism says our kamma only conditions us. According to Hinduism an eternal soul or atman passes from one life to the next while Buddhism denies that there is such a soul saying rather that it is a constantly changing stream of mental energy that is reborn. There are just some of the many differences between the two religions on kamma and rebirth. However, even if the Buddhist and Hindu teachings were identical this would not necessarily mean that the Buddha unthinkingly copied the ideas of others.

It sometimes happens that two people, quite independently of each other, make exactly the same discovery. A good example of this was the discovery of evolution. In 1858, just before he published his famous book *The Origin of the Species*, Charles Darwin found that another man, Alfred Russell Wallace, had conceived the idea of evolution just as he had done. Darwin and Wallace had not copied each other's ideas; rather, by studying the same phenomena they had come to the same conclusion about it. So even if Hindu and Buddhist ideas about kamma and rebirth were identical, which they are not, this would not necessarily be proof of coping. The truth is that through insights they developed in meditation Hindu sages got vague ideas about kamma and rebirth which the Buddha later expounded more fully and accurately.

2. Basic Buddhist Concepts

Question: What are the main teachings of the Buddha?
Answer: All of the many teachings of the Buddha center on the Four Noble Truths just as the rim and spokes of a wheel center on the hub.

They are called 'Four' because there are four of them. They are called 'Noble' because they ennoble one who understands them and they are called 'Truths' because, corresponding with reality, they are true.

Question: What is the First Noble Truth?
Answer: The first Noble Truth is that life is suffering. To live is to suffer. It is impossible to live without experiencing some kind of pain or distress. We have to endure physical suffering like sickness, injury, tiredness, old age and eventually death and we have to endure psychological suffering like loneliness, frustrations, fear, embarrassment, disappointment, anger, etc.

Question: Isn't this a bit pessimistic?
Answer: The dictionary defines pessimism as 'the habit of thinking that whatever will happen will be bad,' or 'the belief that evil is more powerful than good.' Buddhism teaches neither of these ideas. Nor does it deny that happiness exists. It simply says that to live is to experience physical and psychological suffering which is a statement so true and so obvious that it cannot be denied. Buddhism starts with an experience, an irrefutable fact, a thing that all know, that all have experienced and that all are trying to avoid. Thus, Buddhism starts by going straight to the core of every individual human beings' concern – suffering and how to avoid it.

Question: What is the Second Noble Truth?
Answer: The Second Noble Truth is that craving causes all suffering. When we look at psychological suffering, it is easy to see how it is caused by craving. When we want something but are unable to get it, we feel disappointed or frustrated. When we expect someone to live up to our expectation and they do not, we feel let down and angry. When we want others to like us and they don't, we feel hurt. Even when we want something and are able to get it, this does not often lead to happiness either because it is not long before we feel bored with that thing, lose interest in it and commence to want something else. Put simply, the Second Noble Truth says that getting what you want does not guaran-

tee happiness. Rather than constantly struggling to get what you want, try to modify your wanting. Wanting deprives us of contentment and happiness.

Question: But how does wanting and craving lead to physical suffering?
Answer: A lifetime of wanting and craving for this and that and especially the craving to continue to exist creates a powerful energy that causes the individual to be reborn. When we are reborn, we have a body and as we said before, the body is susceptible to injury and disease; it can be exhausted by work; it ages and eventually dies. Thus, craving leads to physical suffering because it causes us to be reborn.

Question: That's all very well. But if we stopped wanting altogether, we would never get anything or achieve anything.
Answer: True. But what the Buddha says is that when our desire, our craving, our constant discontent with what we have and our continual longing for more and more **does** cause us suffering, then we should stop doing it. He asked us to make a difference between what we need and what we want and to strive for our needs and modify our wants. He taught us that our needs can be fulfilled but that our wants are endless – a bottomless pit. There are needs that are essential, fundamental and that can be obtained and we should work towards this. Desires beyond this should be gradually lessened. After all, what is the purpose of life? To get or to be content and happy.

Question: You have talked about rebirth, but is there any proof that such a thing happens?
Answer: There is ample evidence that such a thing happens but we will look at this in more detail later on.

Question: What is the Third Noble Truth?
Answer: The Third Noble Truth is that suffering can be overcome and happiness attained. This is perhaps the most important of the Four Noble Truth because in it the Buddha reassured us that true happiness

and contentment are possible. When we give up useless craving and learn to live each day at a time, enjoying without restless wanting the experiences that life offers us, patiently enduring the problems that life involves without fear, hatred and anger, then we become happy and free. Then and only then, do we being able to live fully. Because we are no longer obsessed with satisfying our own selfish wants, we find we have so much time to help others fulfil their needs. This state is called Nirvana.

QUESTION: What or where is Nirvana?
ANSWER: It is a dimension transcending time and space and thus is difficult to talk about or even to think about, words and thoughts being only suited to describe the time-space dimension. But because Nirvana is beyond time, there is no movement, no friction and so no aging or dying. Thus Nirvana is eternal. Because it is beyond space, there is no causation, no boundary, no concept of self and not self and thus Nirvana is infinite. The Buddha also assured us that Nirvana is an experience of great happiness. He said:

> *'Nirvana is the highest happiness.'* Dp.204

QUESTION: But is there any proof that such dimension exists?
ANSWER: No there is not. But its existence can be inferred. If there is a dimension where time and space do operate and there is such dimension – the world we experience – then we can infer that there is a dimension where time and space do not operate – Nirvana. Again, even though we cannot prove Nirvana exists, we have the Buddha's word that it does. He told us:

> *'There is an Unborn, a Not-become, a Not-made, a Not- compounded. If there were not this Unborn, Not-become, Not-made, Not-compounded, there could not be an escape from what is born, become, made, and compounded. But since there is this Unborn, Not-become, Not-made, Not-compounded, there is an escape from what is born, become, made and compounded.'* Ud, 80

We will know it when we attain it. Until that time, we can still practice.

Question: What is the Fourth Noble Truth?
Answer: The Fourth Noble Truth is the Path leading to the overcoming of suffering. This path is called the Noble Eightfold Path and consists of Perfect Understanding, Perfect Thought, Perfect Speech, Perfect Action, Perfect Livelihood, Perfect Effort, Perfect Mindfulness and Perfect Concentration. Buddhist practice consists of practicing these eight things until they become more complete. You will notice that the steps on the Noble Eightfold Path cover every aspect of life: the intellectual, the ethical, the social and economic and the psychological and therefore contain everything a person needs to lead a good life and to develop spiritually.

3. Buddhism and the God-idea

Question: Do you Buddhists believe in god?
Answer: No, we do not. There are several reasons for this. Like modern sociologists and psychologists, the Buddha saw that many religious ideas and especially the god-idea have their origin in anxiety and fear. The Buddha says:

> *'Gripped by fear people go to the sacred mountains, sacred groves, sacred trees and shrines.'* Dp.188

Primitive humans found themselves in a dangerous and hostile world, the fear of wild animals, of not being able to find enough food, of injury or disease, and of natural phenomena like thunder, lightning and volcanoes was constantly with them. Finding no security, they created the idea of gods in order to give them comfort in good times, courage in times of danger and consolation when things went wrong. To this day you will notice that people often become more religious at times of crises, you will hear them say that the belief in their god or gods gives them the strength they need to deal with life. Often they explain that they believe in a particular god because they prayed

in time of need and their prayer was answered. All this seems to support the Buddha's teaching that the god-idea is a response to fear and frustration. The Buddha taught us to try to understand our fears, to lessen our desires and to calmly and courageously accept the things we cannot change. He replaced fear with rational understanding not with irrational belief.

The second reason the Buddha did not believe in a god is because there does not seem to be very much evidence to support this idea. There are numerous religions, all claiming that they alone have god's words preserved in their holy book, that they alone understand god's nature, that their god exists and that the gods of other religions do not. Some claim that god is masculine, some that she is feminine and others that it is neuter. They are all satisfied that there is ample evidence to prove the existence of the god they worship but they scoff at the evidence other religions use to prove the existence of other gods. It is surprising that despite so many religions using so much ingenuity over so many centuries to prove the existence of god that there is still no real, concrete, substantial or irrefutable evidence for such a being. Buddhists suspend judgement until such evidence is forthcoming.

The third reason the Buddha did not believe in a god is because he felt that the belief was not necessary. Some claim that the belief in a god is necessary in order to explain the origin on the universe. But science has very convincingly explained how the universe came into being without having to introduce the god-idea. Some claim that belief in god is necessary to have a happy meaningful life. But again we can see that this is not so. There are millions of atheists and free-thinkers, not to mention many Buddhists, who live useful, happy and meaningful lives without belief in a god. Some claim that belief in god's power is necessary because humans, being weak, do not have the strength to help themselves. Once again, the evidence indicates the opposite. One often hears of people who have overcome great disabilities and handicaps, enormous odds and difficulties, through their own inner resources, their own efforts and without belief in a god. Some claim that god is necessary in order to give salvation. But this argument only holds good if you accept the theological concept of salvation and Buddhists do not accept

such a concept. Based on his own experience the Buddha saw that each human being has the capacity to purify the mind, develop infinite love and compassion and perfect understanding. He shifted attention from the heavens to the heart and encouraged us to find solutions to our problems through self-understanding.

QUESTION: But if there are no gods how did the universe get here?
ANSWER: All religions have myths and stories which attempt to answer this question. In ancient times such myths were adequate but in the 21st century, in the age of physics, astronomy and geology, such myths have been superseded by scientific fact. Science has explained the origin of the universe without recourse to the god-idea.

QUESTION: What does the Buddha say about the origin of the universe?
ANSWER: It is interesting that the Buddha's explanation of the origin of the universe corresponds very closely to the scientific view. In the Aganna Sutta, the Buddha described the universe being destroyed and then re-evolving into its present form over a period of countless millions of years. The first life formed on the surface of the water and again, over countless millions of years, evolved from simple into complex organisms. All these processes were, he said, without beginning or end, and are set in motion by natural causes.

QUESTION: You say there is no evidence for the existence of god but what about miracles?
ANSWER: There are many people who believe that miracles are proof of god's existence. We hear wild claims that a healing has taken place but we never seem to get independent testimony of this from a medical office or a doctor. We hear second-hand reports that someone was miraculously saved from disaster but we never seem to get eye-witness accounts of what is supposed to have happened. We hear rumors that prayer straightened a diseased body or strengthened a withered limb, but we never see X-rays or get comments from doctors or nurses to prove these rumors. Wild claims, second-hand reports and hearsay are

no substitute for solid evidence and solid evidence of miracles is very rare. However, unusual and unexplained things sometimes do happen. But our inability to explain such things does not prove the existence of gods. It only proves that our knowledge is as yet incomplete. Before the development of modern medicine, when people didn't know what caused sickness, they believed that god or the gods sent diseases as a punishment. Now we know what causes such things and when we get sick, we take medicine. In time when our knowledge of the world is more complete, we may find out what causes unexplained phenomena, just as we can now understand what causes disease.

QUESTION: But so many people believe in some form of god, it must be true.
ANSWER: Not so. There was a time when everyone believed that the world was flat, but they were all wrong. The number of people who believe in an idea is no measure of the truth or falsehood of that idea. The only way we can tell whether an idea is true or not is by looking at the facts and examining the evidence.

QUESTION: So if you Buddhists don't believe in gods, what do you believe in?
ANSWER: We do not believe in a god because we believe in humanity. We believe that each human being is precious and important, that all have the potential to develop into a Buddha – a perfected human being. We believe that human beings can outgrow ignorance and irrationality and see things as they really are. We believe that hatred, anger, spite and jealousy can be replaced by love, patience, generosity and kindness. We believe that all this is within the grasp of each person if they make the effort, guided and supported by their fellow Buddhists and inspired by the example of the Buddha. As the Buddha says:

> *'No one saves us but ourselves,*
> *No one can and no one may.*
> *We ourselves must walk the path,*
> *But Buddhas clearly show the way.'* Dp.165

4. The Five Precepts

Question: Other religions derive their ideas of right and wrong from the commandments of their god or gods. You Buddhists don't believe in a god, so how do you know what is right and wrong?
Answer: Any thoughts, speech or actions that are rooted in greed, hatred and delusion and thus lead us away from Nirvana are bad and any thoughts, speech or actions that are rooted in giving, love and wisdom and thus help clear the way to Nirvana are good. To know what is right and wrong in god-centered religions, all that is needed is to do as you are told. In a human-centered religion like Buddhism, to know what is right and wrong, you have to develop a deep self-awareness and self-understanding. And ethics based on understanding are always stronger than those that are a response to a command. So to know what is right and wrong, the Buddhist looks at three things – the intention behind the act, the effect the act will have upon oneself and the effect it will have upon others. If the intention is good (rooted in generosity, love and wisdom), if it helps myself (helps me to be more giving, more loving and wiser) and help others (helps them to be more giving, more loving and wiser), then my deeds and actions are wholesome, good and moral. Of course, there are many variations of this. Sometimes, I act with the best of intentions but it may not benefit either myself or others. Sometimes my intentions are far from good, but my action helps others nonetheless. Sometimes I act out of good intentions and my acts help me but perhaps cause some distress to others. In such cases, my actions are mixed – a mixture of good and not-so-good. When intentions are bad and the action helps neither myself nor others, such an action is bad. And when my intention is good and my action benefits both myself and others, then the deed is wholly good.

Question: So does Buddhism have a code of morality?
Answer: Yes it does. The Five Precepts are the basis of Buddhist morality. The First Precept is to avoid killing or harming living beings, the second is to avoid stealing, the third is to avoid sexual misconduct, the fourth is to avoid lying and the fifth is to avoid alcohol and other intoxicating drugs.

Question: But surely it is good to kill sometimes, to kill disease-spreading insects or someone who is going to kill you?
Answer: It might be good for you but what about the insect or the person who is killed? They wish to live just as you do. When you decide to kill a disease-spreading insect, your intention is perhaps a mixture of self-concern (good) and revulsion (bad). The act will benefit yourself (good) but obviously it will not benefit that creature (bad). So at times it may be necessary to kill but it is never wholly good.

Question: You Buddhist are too concerned about ants and bugs.
Answer: Buddhist try to develop a compassion that is undiscriminating and all- embracing. We see the world as a unified whole where each thing and creature has its place and function. We believe that before we destroy or upset nature's delicate balance, we should be very careful. Where emphasis has been on exploiting nature to the full, squeezing every last drop out of it without putting anything back, conquering and subduing it, nature has revolted. The air is becoming poisoned, the rivers polluted and dead, so many animal and plants are heading for extinction, the slopes of the mountains are barren and eroded. Even the climate is changing. If people were a little less anxious to crush, destroy and kill, this terrible situation may not have arisen. We should strive to develop a little more respect for all life. And this is what the First Precept is about.

Question: What does Buddhism say about abortion?
Answer: According to the Buddha life begins at conception or very soon after and so to abort a fetus would be to take a life.

Question: But if a woman is raped or if she knows that her child is going to be deformed, wouldn't it be better to stop the pregnancy?
Answer: A child conceived as the result of a rape is as entitled to live and be loved as any other child. He or she should not be killed simply because their biological father committed a crime. Giving birth to a deformed or mentally retarded child would be a terrible shock for the parents but if its okay to abort a fetus like this then why not kill children

or adults who are deformed or handicapped? There might be situations where abortion was the most humane alternative, for example, to save the life of a mother. But let's be honest, most abortions are preformed simply because the pregnancy is inconvenient, an embarrassment or because the parents want to have the child later. To Buddhists, these seem a very poor reasons to destroy a life.

Question: If someone committed suicide would they be breaking the First Precept?
Answer: When one person murders another they might do it out of fear, anger, fury, greed or some other negative emotions. When a person kills themselves they might do it for very similar reasons or because of other negative emotions like despair or frustration. So whereas murder is the result of negative emotions directed towards another, suicide is negative emotions directed towards oneself and therefor would be breaking the Precept. However, someone who is contemplating suicide or had attempted suicide does not need being told that what they are doing is wrong. They need our support and our understanding. We have to help them understand that killing themselves is perpetuating their problem, not solving it.

Question: Tell me about the Second Precept.
Answer: When we take this Precept we undertake to take nothing that does not belong to us. The Second Precept is about restraining our greed and respecting the property of others.

Question: The Third Precept says we should avoid sexual misconduct. What is sexual misconduct?
Answer: If we use trickery, emotional blackmail or force to compel someone to have sex with us, then that can be said to be sexual misconduct. Adultery is also a form of sexual misconduct because when we marry we promised our spouse we will be loyal to them. When we commit adultery we break that promise and betray their trust. Sex should be an expression of love and intimacy between two people and when it is it contributes to our mental and emotional well-being.

Question: Is sex before marriage a type of sexual misconduct?
Answer: Not if there is love and mutual agreement between the two people concerned. However, it should never be forgotten that the biological function of sex is reproduction and if an unmarried woman becomes pregnant, it can cause a great deal of problems. Many mature and thoughtful people think that it is far better to leave sex until after marriage.

Question: What does Buddhism say about birth control?
Answer: Some religions teach that having sex for any reason other than procreation is immoral and thus they consider all forms of birth control to be wrong. Buddhism recognizes that sex has several purposes – procreation, recreation, as an expression of love and affection between two people, etc. This being the case, it considers all forms of birth control except abortion to be alright. In fact, Buddhism would say that in a world where the population explosion has become a major problem, birth control is a real blessing.

Question: But what about the Fourth Precept? Is it possible to live without telling lies?
Answer: If it is really impossible to get by in society or do business without lying, such a shocking and corrupt state of affairs should be changed. The Buddhist is someone who resolves to do something practical about the problem by trying to be more truthful and honest.

Question: If you were sitting in the park and a terrified man ran passed you and then a few minutes later another man carrying a knife ran up to you and asked if you had seen which way the first man had gone, would you tell him the truth or would you lie to him?
Answer: If I had good reason to suspect that the second man was going to do serious harm to the first I would, as an intelligent caring Buddhist, have no hesitation in lying. We said before that one of the factors determining whether a deed is good or bad is intention. The intention to save a life is many times more positive than telling a lie in circumstances such as these. If lying, drinking or even stealing meant that I saved a life I should do it. I can always make amends for breaking

these Precepts but I can never bring back a life once it is gone. However, as said before, please do not take this as a license to break the Precepts whenever it is convenient. The Precepts should be practiced with great care and only infringed in extreme cases.

Question: The Fifth Precept says we should not drink alcohol or take other drugs. Why not?
Answer: People don't drink for the taste. When they drink alone it is in order to seek release from tension and when they drink socially, it is usually to conform. Even a small amount of alcohol distorts consciousness and disrupts self-awareness. Taken in large quantities, its effect can be devastating. Buddhists say that when you break the Fifth Precept you can break all the other Precepts.

Question: But drinking just a small amount wouldn't be really breaking the precept, would it? It's only a small thing.
Answer: Yes, it is only a small thing and if you can't practice even a small thing, your commitment and resolution isn't very strong, is it?

Question: Would smoking be against the Fifth Precept?
Answer: Smoking certainly has a negative effect on the body but its effect on the mind is very minor. One is able to smoke and still be alert, mindful and self-possessed so while smoking might be inadvisable it would not be against the Precepts.

Question: The Five Precepts are negative. They tell you what not to do. They don't tell you what to do.
Answer: The Five Precepts are the basis of Buddhist morality. They are not all of it. We start by recognizing our negative behavior and striving to stop transform it. That is what the Five Precepts are for. After we have stopped doing wrong, we then commence to do good. Take for example the Forth Precept. The Buddha said we should start by refraining from telling lies. After that, we should speak the truth, speak gently, politely and at the right time.

'Giving up false speech he becomes a speaker of truth, reliable, trustworthy, dependable, he does not deceive the world. Giving up malicious speech he does not repeat there what he has heard here nor does he repeat here what he has heard there in order to cause variance between people. He reconciles those who are divided and brings closer together those who are already friends. Harmony is his joy, harmony is his delight, harmony is his love; it is the motive of his speech. Giving up harsh speech his speech is blameless, pleasing to the ear, agreeable, going to the heart, urbane, liked by most. Giving up idle chatter he speaks at the right time, what is correct, to the point, about Dhamma and about discipline. He speaks words worth being treasured up, seasonable, reasonable, well defined and to the point.' M.I,179

5. Rebirth

Question: Where do we humans come from and where are we going?

Answer: There are three possible answers to this question. Those who believe in a god or gods usually claims that before individuals are created, they do not exist, then they come into being through the will of a god. They live their lives and then, according to what they believe or do during their life, they go either to eternal heaven or eternal hell. There are others, humanists and scientists, who claims that the individual comes into being at conception due to natural causes, lives and then at death, cease to exist. Buddhism does not accept either of these explanations. The first gives rise to many ethical problems. If a good god really creates each of us, it is difficult to explain why so many people are born with the most dreadful deformities or why so many babies are miscarried just before birth or are still-born. Another problem with the theistic explanation is that it seems very unjust that a person should suffer eternal pain in hell for what they did in just 60 or 70 years on earth. Sixty or 70 years of non-beliefs or immoral living does not seem to deserve eternal torture. Likewise, 60 or 70 years of

virtuous living seems a very small outlay for eternal bliss in heaven. The second explanation is better than the first and has more scientific evidence to support it but still leaves important questions unanswered. How can a phenomenon so amazingly complex as human consciousness develop from the simple meeting the sperm and the egg and in just nine months? And now that parapsychology is a recognized branch of science, phenomena like telepathy are increasingly difficult to fit into the materialistic model of the mind.

Buddhism offers the most satisfactory explanation of where humans come from and where they is going. When we die, the mind with all the tendencies, preferences, abilities and characteristics that have been developed and conditioned in this life, re-establishes itself in a fertilized egg. Thus the individual grows, is reborn and develops a personality conditioned both by the mental characteristics that have been carried over from the last life and by the new environment. The personality will change and be modified by conscious effort and conditioning factors like education, parental influence and society and once again at death, re-establish itself in a new fertilized egg. This process of dying and being reborn will continue until the conditions that cause it, craving and ignorance, cease. When they do, instead of being reborn, the mind attains a state called Nirvana and this is the ultimate goal of Buddhism and the purpose of life.

Question: How does the mind go from one body to another?
Answer: Think of being like radio waves. The radio waves, which are not made up of words and music but energy at different frequencies, are transmitted, move through space, are attracted to and picked up by the receiver from where they are broadcast as words and music. It is similar with the mind. At death, mental energy moves through space, is attracted to and picked up by the fertilized egg. As the embryo grows, it centers itself in the brain from where it later 'broadcasts' itself as the new personality.

Question: Is one always reborn as a human being?
Answer: No, there are several realms in which one can be reborn. Some

people are reborn in heaven, some are reborn in hell, some are reborn as hungry spirits and so on. Heaven is not so much a place as a state of existence where one has a subtle body and where the mind experiences mainly pleasure. Like all conditioned states, heaven is impermanent and when one's life span there is finished, one could well be reborn again as human. Hell, likewise, is not a place but a state of existence where one has a subtle body and where the mind experiences mainly anxiety and distress. Being hungry ghost, again, is a state of being where the body is subtle and where the mind is continually plagued by longing and dissatisfaction. So heavenly beings experience mainly pleasure, hell beings and hungry spirits experience mainly pain and human beings experience usually a mixture of both. The main difference between the human realm and other realms is the body type and the quality of experience.

Question: What decides where a person will be reborn?
Answer: The most important factor, but not the only one, influencing where we will be reborn and what sort of life we shall have, is kamma. The word kamma means 'action' and refers to our intentional mental actions. In other words, what we are is determined very much by how we have thought and acted in the past. Likewise, how we think and act now will influence how we will be in the future. The gentle, loving type of person tends to be reborn in a heaven realm or as a human being who has a predominance of pleasant experiences. The anxious, worried or extremely cruel type of person tends to be reborn in a hell realm or as a human being who has a predominance of unpleasant experiences. The person who develops obsessive craving, fierce longings and burning ambitions that can never be satisfied tends to be reborn as a hungry spirit or as a human being frustrated by longing and wanting. Whatever mental habits are strongly developed in this life will simply continue in the next life. Most people, however, are reborn as human being.

Question: So we are not determined by our kamma, we can change it.
Answer: Of course we can. That is why one of the steps on the Noble Eightfold Path is Perfect Effort. It depends on our sincerity, how much

energy we exert and how strong the habit is. But it is true that some people simply go through life under the influence of their past habits, without making an effort to change them and falling victim to their unpleasant results. Such people will continue to suffer unless they change their negative habits. The longer the negative habits remain, the more difficult they are to change. The Buddhist understand this and take advantage of each and every opportunity to break mental habits that have unpleasant results and to develop ones that have a pleasant result. Meditation is one of the techniques used to modify the habit patterns of the mind as does speaking or refraining form speaking, acting or refraining from acting in certain ways. The whole of the Buddhist life is a training to purify and free the mind. For example, if being patient and kind were a pronounced part of your character in your last life, such tendencies would re-emerge in the present life. If they are encourages and developed in the present life they will re-emerge even stronger and more pronounce in the future life. This is based upon the simple and observable fact that long established habits tend to be difficult to break.

Now, when you are patient and kind, it tends to happen that you are not easily ruffled by others, you don't hold grudges, people like you and thus your experiences tends to be happier. Take another example. Let us say that you came into life with tendency to be patient and kind due to your mental habits in the past life. But in the present life you neglect to strengthen and develop such tendencies. They would gradually weaken and die out and perhaps be completely absent in the future life. Patience and kindness being weak in this case, there is a possibility that in either this life or in the next life, a short temper, anger and cruelty could grow and develop, bringing with them all the unpleasant experiences such attitudes create.

We will take one last example. Let us say that due to your mental habits in the last life, you came into the present life with the tendency to be short-tempered and angry and you realize that such habits only cause unpleasantness. If you are only able to weaken such tendencies, they would re-emerge in the next life where with a bit more effort, they could be eliminated completely and you could be free from their unpleasant effects.

Question: You have talked a lot about rebirth but is there any proof that we are reborn when we die?
Answer: Not only is there scientific evidence to support the Buddhist belief in rebirth, it is the only after-life theory that has any evidence to support it. There is not a scrap of evidence to prove the existence of heaven and of course evidence of annihilation at death must be lacking. But during the last 30 years, parapsychologists have been studying reports that some people have vivid memories of their former lives. For example, in England, a 5 year old girl said she could remember her 'other mother and father' and she talked vividly about what sounded like the events in the life of another person. Parapsychologists were called in and they asked hundreds of questions to which the girl gave answers. She spoke of living in a particular village in what appeared to be Spain, she gave the name of the village, the name of the street she lived in, her neighbors' names and details about her everyday life there. She also tearfully spoke of how she had been struck by a car and died of her injuries two days later. When these details were checked, they were found to be accurate. There was a village in Spain with the name the girl had given. There was a house of the type she had described in the street she had named. What is more, it was found that a 23 year old woman living in the house had been killed in a car accident 5 years before. Now how is it possible for a 5 year old girl living in England and who had never been to Spain to know all these details? And of course, this is not the only case of this type. Professor Ian Stevenson of the University of Virginia's Department of Psychology has described dozens of cases of this type in his books. He is an accredited scientist whose 25 year study of people who remember former lives is very strong evidence for the Buddhist teaching of rebirth.[1]

Question: Some people might say that the supposed ability to remember former lives is the work of devils.
Answer: You simply cannot dismiss everything that doesn't fit into your belief as being the work of devils. When cold hard facts are produced to

1 See *Twenty Cases Suggestive of Reincarnation and Cases of Reincarnation Type*, University Press of Virginia, Charlotteville, 1975.

support an idea, you must use rational and logical arguments if you wish to counter them – not irrational and superstitious talk about devils.

Question: You could say that talk about rebirth a bit superstitious also?
Answer: The dictionary defines superstition as 'a belief which is not based on reason or fact but on an association of ideas, as in magic.' If you can show me a careful study of the existence of devils written by a scientist I will concede that belief in devils is not superstition. But I have never heard of any research into devils; scientists simply wouldn't bother to study such things, so I say there is no evidence for the existence of devils. But as we have just seen, there is evidence which seems to suggest that rebirth does take place. If belief in rebirth is based on at least some facts, it cannot be a superstition.

Question: Well, have there been any scientist who believe in rebirth?
Answer: Yes. Thomas Huxley, who was responsible for having science introduced into the British school system in the 19th century and who was the first scientist to defend Darwin's theories, believed that reincarnation was a very plausible idea. In his famous book Evolution and Ethics and other Essays, he says:

> *'In the doctrine of transmigration, whatever its origin, Brahmanical and Buddhist speculation found, ready to hand, the means of constructing a plausible vindication of the ways of the Cosmos to man… Yet this plea of justification is not less plausible than others; and none but very hasty thinkers will reject it on the ground of inherent absurdity. Like the doctrine of evolution itself, that of transmigration has its roots in the world of reality; and it may claim such support as the great argument from analogy is capable of supplying.'*

Professor Gustaf Stromberg, the famous Swedish astronomer, physicist and friend of Einstein also found the idea of rebirth appealing.

> *'Opinions differ whether human souls can be reincarnated on the earth or not. In 1936 a very interesting case was thoroughly*

investigated and reported by the government authorities in India. A girl (Shanti Devi from Delhi) could accurately describe her previous life (at Muttra, five hundred miles from Delhi) which ended about a year before her "second birth". She gave the name of her husband and child and described her home and life history. The investigating commission brought her to her former relatives, who verified all her statements. Among the people of India reincarnations are regarded as commonplace; the astonishing thing for them in this case was the great number of facts the girl remembered. This and similar cases can be regarded as additional evidence for the theory of the indestructibility of memory.'

Professor Julian Huxley, the distinguished British scientist who was Director General of UNESCO believed that rebirth was quite in harmony with scientific thinking.

'There is nothing against a permanently surviving spirit-individuality being in some way given off at death, as a definite wireless message is given off by a sending apparatus working in a particular way. But it must be remembered that the wireless message only becomes a message again when it comes in contact with a new, material structure – the receiver. It… would never think or feel unless again 'embodied' in some way. Our personalities are so based on body that it is really impossible to think of survival which would be in any true sense personal without a body of sorts… I can think of something being given off which would bear the same relation to men and women as a wireless message to the transmitting apparatus; but in that case 'the dead' would, so far as one can see, be nothing but disturbances of different patterns wandering through the universe until… they… came back to actuality of consciousness by making contact with something which could work as a receiving apparatus for mind.'

Even very practical and down-to-earth people like the American industrialist Henry Ford found the idea or rebirth acceptable. Ford was

attracted to the idea because it gives one a second chance to develop oneself. Henry Ford said:

> *'I adopted the theory of Reincarnation when I was twenty-six… Religion offered nothing to the point… Even work could not give me complete satisfaction. Work is futile if we cannot utilize the experience we collect in one life in the next. When I discovered Reincarnation it was as if I had found a universal plan. I realized that there was a chance to work out my ideas. Time was no longer limited. I was no longer a slave to the hands of the clock… Genius is experience. Some seem to think that it is a gift or talent, but it is the fruit of long experience in many lives. Some are older souls than others, and so they know more… The discovery of Reincarnation put my mind at ease… If you preserve a record of this conversation, write it so that it puts men's minds at ease. I would like to communicate to others the calmness that the long view of life gives to us.'*

So the Buddhist teachings of rebirth does have some scientific basis, it is logically consistent and it goes a long way to answering some important questions about human destiny. But it is also very comforting. According to Buddha, if you failed to attain Nirvana in this life, you will have the opportunity to try again next time. If you have made mistakes in this life, you will be able to correct yourself in the next life. You will truly be able to learn from your mistakes. Things you were unable to do or achieve in this life may well become possible in the next life. What a wonderful teaching!

Question: All this is very intellectually satisfying but I must admit that I am still a bit skeptical.
Answer: That's okay. Buddhism is not the type of religion you have to sign up to and commit yourself to believe everything it teaches. What is the point of forcing yourself to believe things you just can't believe? You can still practice those things that you find helpful, accept those ideas that you understandable and benefit from them without believing in rebirth. How knows! In time you may come to see the truth of rebirth.

6. Meditation

Question: What is meditation?
Answer: Meditation is a conscious effort to change how the mind works. The Pali word for meditation is bhavana which means 'to make grow' or 'to develop.'

Question: Is meditation important?
Answer: Yes, it is. No matter how much we may wish to be good, if we cannot change the desires that make us act the way we do, change will be difficult. For example, a person may realize that he is impatient with his wife and he may promise himself: 'From now on I am not going to be so impatient.' But an hour later he may be shouting at his wife simply because, not being aware of himself, impatience has arisen without him knowing. Meditation helps to develop the awareness and the energy needed to transform ingrained mental habit patterns.

Question: I have heard that meditation can be dangerous. Is this true?
Answer: To live we need salt. But if you were to eat a kilo of salt it would probably kill you. To function in the modern world you need a car but if you don't follow the traffic rules or if you drive while you are drunk, a car would become a dangerous machine. Meditation is like this, it is essential for our mental health and well-being but if you practice in the wrong way, it could cause problems. Some people have problems like depression, irrational fears or schizophrenia, they think meditation is an instant cure for their problem, they start meditating and sometimes their problem gets worse. If you have such a problem, you should seek professional help and then after you are better take up meditation. Other people over-reach themselves, they take up meditation and instead of going gradually, step by step, they meditate with too much energy or for long periods and soon they are exhausted. But perhaps most problems in meditation are caused by 'kangaroo meditation.' Some people go to one teacher and do his meditation technique for a while. Then they read something in a book and decide to try that technique. A week later a famous meditation teacher visits their town

and so they decide to incorporate some of his ideas into their practice and before long they are hopelessly confused. Jumping like a kangaroo from one teacher to another or from one meditation technique to another is a mistake. But if you don't have any severe mental problem and you take up meditation and practice sensibly it is one of the best things you can do for yourself.

Question: How many types of meditation are there?
Answer: The Buddha taught many different types of meditation, each designed to overcome a particular problem or to develop a particular psychological state. But the two most common and useful types of meditation are Mindfulness of Breathing, anapana sati, and Loving Kindness Meditation, metta bhavana.

Question: If I wanted to practice Mindfulness of Breathing, how would I do it?
Answer: You would follows these easy steps; the four Ps – place, posture, practice and problems. First, find a suitable place, perhaps a room that is not too noisy and where you are unlikely to be disturbed. Second, sit in a comfortable posture. A good way to sit is with your legs folded, a pillow under your buttocks, your back straight, your hands nestled in the lap and the eyes closed. Alternatively, you can sit on a chair as long as you keep your back straight. Next comes the actual practice itself. As you sit quietly with your eyes closed, you focus your attention on the in and out movement of the breath. This can be done by counting the breaths or watching the rise and fall of the abdomen. When this is done, certain problems and difficulties will arise. You might experience irritating itches on the body or discomfort in the knees. If this happens, try to keep the body relaxed without moving and keep focusing on the breath. You will probably have many intruding thoughts coming into your mind and distracting your attention from the breath. The only way you can deal with this is to patiently keep gently returning your attention to the breath. If you keep doing this, eventually thoughts will weaken, your concentration will become stronger and you will have moments of deep mental calm and inner peace.

Question: How long should I meditate for?
Answer: It is good to do meditation for 15 minutes every day for a week and then extend the time by 5 minutes each week until you are meditating for 45 minutes. After a few weeks of regular daily meditation you will start to notice that your concentration gets better.

Question: What about Loving-Kindness Meditation? How is that practiced?
Answer: Once you are familiar with Mindfulness of Breathing and are practicing it regularly you can start practicing Loving Kindness Meditation. It should be done two or three times each week after you have done Mindfulness of Breathing. First, you turn your attention to yourself and say to yourself words like 'May I be well and happy. May I be peaceful and calm. May I be protected from dangers. May my mind be free from hatred. May my heart be filled with love. May I be well and happy.' Then one by one you think of a loved person, a neutral person, that is someone you neither like nor dislike, and finally a disliked person, wishing each of them well as you do so.

Question: What is the benefit of doing this type of meditation?
Answer: If you do Loving Kindness Meditation regularly and with the right attitude, you may notice very positive changes taking place within yourself. You will find that you are able to be more accepting and forgiving towards yourself. You will find that the feelings you have towards your loved ones increases. You will find yourself making friends with people you used to be indifferent and uncaring towards, and you will find the ill-will or resentment you have towards some people will lessen and eventually be dissolved. Sometimes if you know of someone who is sick, unhappy or encountering difficulties, you can include them in your meditation and very often you will find their situation improving.

Question: How is that possible?
Answer: The mind, when properly developed, is a very powerful instrument. If we can learn to focus our mental energy and project it

towards others, it can have an effect upon them. You may have had an experience like this. Perhaps you are in a crowded room and you get this feeling that someone is watching you. You turn around and, sure enough, someone is staring at you. What has happened is that you have picked up that other person's mental energy. Loving Kindness Meditation is like this. We project positive mental energy towards others and it may gradually transforms them.

QUESTION: Are there any other types of meditation?
ANSWER: Yes. The last and perhaps most important type of meditation is called vipassana. This word means 'to see in' or 'to see deep' and is usually translated as insight meditation.

QUESTION: Explain what insight meditation is.
ANSWER: During insight meditation a person tries just to be aware of whatever happens to them without thinking about it or reacting to it.

QUESTION: What is the purpose of that?
ANSWER: Usually we react to our experience by liking or disliking it or by letting it trigger thoughts, daydreams or memories. All these reactions distort or obscure our experience so that we fail to understand it properly. By developing a non-reactive awareness we begin to see why we think, speak and act the way we do. And of course more self knowledge can have a very positive effect on our lives. The other advantage of practicing insight meditation is that after a while it creates a gap between our experience and ourselves. Then rather than automatically and unconsciously reacting to every temptation or provocation we find that we are able to step back a little, thereby allowing us to decide whether we should act or not and if so how. Thus we begin to have more control of our life, not because we have developed an iron will but simply because we see more clearly.

QUESTION: So am I right in saying that insight meditation is to help to make us better, happier individuals?
ANSWER: Well that is a start, a very important start. But meditation has

a much loftier aim than that. As our practice matures and our awareness deepens we start to notice that our experience is rather impersonal, that it is actually happening without a 'me' making it happen and that there is not even a 'me' experiencing it. In the beginning the meditator might just have occasional glimpses of this but in time it will become more pronounced.

Question: That sounds rather frightening.
Answer: Yes it does doesn't it. And in fact when some people first have this experience they may be a little frightened. But soon the fear is replaces by a profound realization – the realization that they are not what they have always taken themselves to be. Gradually the ego begins to weaken and in time it dissolves completely as does the sense of 'I', 'Me' and 'Mine.' It is at this point that the Buddhist's life and indeed their whole outlook really begins to change. Just consider how many personal, social and even international conflicts have their origins in the ego, in racial or national pride, in the sense of being wronged, humiliated or threatened and in the shrill cry 'This is mine!' 'That belongs to us!' According to Buddhism real peace and happiness can only be found when we discover our true identity. This is what is called enlightenment.

Question: That's a very attractive idea but at the same time it's a rather alarming one too. How does an enlightened person function without a sense of self or without a sense of ownership?
Answer: Well, an enlightened person may well ask us, 'How can you function with a sense of self? How are you able endure all the unpleasantness of fear, jealousy, grief and pride, your own and other peoples? Don't you ever get sick of the endless scramble to accumulate more and more, of the need to always be better than or ahead of the next person, of the nagging feeling that you might just loose it all?' It seems that enlightened people get along quite alright in life. It's the unenlightened ones, you and I, who have all the problems and cause all the problems.

Question: I see your point. But how long do you have to meditate for

before you become enlightened?
Answer: It is impossible to say and perhaps it doesn't matter. Why not start meditating and see where it takes you? If you practice with sincerity and intelligence you might find that it improves the quality of your life considerably. In time you may wish to explore meditation and Dhamma more deeply. Later, it might become the most important thing in your life. Don't start speculating about or worrying over the higher steps on the path before you have not even began the journey. Take it one step at a time.

Question: Do I need a teacher to teach me meditation?
Answer: A teacher is not absolutely necessary but personal guidance from someone who is familiar with meditation is certainly helpful. Unfortunately, some monks and lay people set themselves up as meditation teachers when they simply don't know what they are doing. Try to pick a teacher who has a good reputation, a balanced personality and who adheres closely to the Buddha's teachings.

Question: I have heard that meditation is widely used today by psychiatrists and psychologists. Is this true?
Answer: Yes, it is. Meditation is now accepted as having a highly therapeutic effect upon the mind and is used by many professional mental health workers to help induce relaxation, overcome phobias and bring out self-awareness. The Buddha's insights into the human mind are helping people as much today as they did in ancient times.

7. Wisdom and Compassion

Question: I often hear Buddhists talk about wisdom and compassion. What do these two terms mean?
Answer: Some religions believe that compassion or l love (the two are very similar) is the most important spiritual quality but they fail to give any attention to wisdom. The result is that you can end up being a good-hearted fool, a very kind person but with little or no

understanding. Other systems of thought like science, believe that wisdom can best be developed when all emotions, including compassion, are kept out of the way. The outcome of this is that science has tended to become preoccupied with results and has forgotten that science is to serve humans, not to control and dominate them. How, otherwise could scientists have lent their skills to develop the nuclear bomb, germ warfare, and the like? Buddhism teaches that to be truly balanced and complete individual, you must develop both wisdom and compassion.

Question: So what, according to Buddhism, is wisdom?
Answer: The highest wisdom is seeing that in reality all phenomena are incomplete, impermanent, and not self. This understanding is totally freeing and leads to the great security and happiness which is called Nirvana. However, the Buddha did not speak too much about this level of wisdom. It is not wisdom if we simply believe what we are told. True wisdom is to directly see and understand for ourselves. At this level then, wisdom is to keep an open mind rather than being closed-minded, listening to other points of view rather than being bigoted; to carefully examine facts that contradict our beliefs, rather than burying our heads in the sand; to be objective rather than prejudiced; to take time about forming opinions and beliefs rather than just accepting the first or most emotional thing that is offered to us. To always be ready to change our beliefs when facts that contradict them are presented to us, that is wisdom. A person who does this is certainly wise and is certain to eventually arrive at true understanding. The path of just believing what you are told is easy. The Buddhist path requires courage, patience, flexibility and intelligence.

Question: I think few people could do this. So what is the point of Buddhism if only a few can practice it?
Answer: It is true that not everyone is ready for the truths of Buddhism yet. But if someone was not able to understand the teachings of the Buddha at present then they may be mature enough in the next life. However, there are many who, with just the right words or

encouragement, are able to increase their understanding. And it is for this reason that Buddhists gently and quietly strive to share the insights of Buddhism with others. The Buddha taught us out of compassion and we should teach others out of compassion too.

QUESTION: What, according to Buddhism, is compassion?
ANSWER: Just as wisdom covers the intellectual or comprehending side of our nature, compassion covers the emotional or feeling side. Like wisdom, compassion is a uniquely human quality. Compassion is made up of two words, co meaning 'together' and passion meaning 'a strong feeling.' And this is what compassion is. When we see someone in distress and we feel their pain as if it were our own, and strive to eliminate or lessen their pain, then that is compassion. All the best in human beings, all the Buddha-like qualities like sharing, readiness to give comfort, sympathy, concern and caring – all these things are manifestations of compassion. You will notice also that in the compassionate person, care and love towards others has its origins in care and love for oneself. We can best understand others when we really understand ourselves. We will know what's best for others when we know what's best for ourselves. We can feel for others when we feel for ourselves. So in Buddhism, one's spiritual development blossoms quite naturally into concern for the welfare of others. The Buddha's life illustrates this principle very well. He spent six years struggling for his own welfare after which he was able to be of benefit to the whole of humankind.

QUESTION: So you are saying that we are best able to help others after we have helped ourselves. Isn't that a bit selfish?
ANSWER: We usually see altruism, concern for others before oneself, as being the opposite of selfishness, concern for oneself before others. Buddhism does not see it as either one or the other but rather as a blending of the two. Genuine self-concern will gradually mature into concern for others as one sees that others are really the same as oneself. This is genuine compassion. Compassion is the most beautiful jewel in the crown of the Buddha's teachings.

8. Vegetarianism

Question: Buddhists should be vegetarians, shouldn't they?
Answer: Not necessarily. The Buddha was not a vegetarian, he did not teach his disciples to be vegetarian and even today there many good Buddhists who are not vegetarians. In the Buddhist scriptures it says;

> *'Being rough, pitiless, back-biting, harming ones friends,*
> *being heartless, arrogant and greedy –*
> *this makes one impure, not the eating of meat.*
> *Being of immoral conduct, refusing to repay debts,*
> *cheating in business, causing divisions amongst people –*
> *This makes one impure, not the eating of meat.'* Sn.246-7

Question: But if you eat meat you are responsible for animals being killed. Isn't that breaking the First Precept?
Answer: It is true that when you eat meat you are indirectly or partially responsible for killing a creature but the same is true when you eat vegetables. The farmer has to spray his crop with insecticides and poisons so that the vegetables arrive on your dinner plates without holes in them. And once again, animals have been killed to provide the leather for your belt or handbag, the oil for the soap you use and a thousand other products as well. It is impossible to live without, in some way, being indirectly responsible for the death of some other beings. This is yet another example of the First Noble Truth, ordinary existence is suffering and unsatisfactory. When you take the First Precept, you try to avoid being directly responsible for killing beings.

Question: Mahayana Buddhists don't eat meat.
Answer: That is not correct. Mahayana Buddhism in China laid great stress on being vegetarian but both the monks and lay people of the Mahayana tradition in Japan, Mongolia and Tibet usually eat meat.

Question: But I still think that a Buddhist should be vegetarian.
Answer: If there was a person who was a very strict vegetarian but

who was selfish, dishonest and mean, and another person who was not vegetarian but who was thoughtful to others, honest, generous and kind, which of these two people would be the better Buddhist?

Question: The person who was honest and kind.
Answer: Why?

Question: Because such a person obviously has a good heart.
Answer: Exactly. One who eats meat can have a pure heart just as one who does not eat meat can have an impure heart. In the Buddha's teachings, the important thing is the quality of your heart, not the contents of your diet. Many people take great care never to eat meat but they may not be too concerned about being selfish, dishonest, cruel or jealous. They change their diet which is easy to do while neglecting to change their hearts which is a difficult thing to do. So whether you are a vegetarian or not, remember that the purification of the mind is the most important thing in Buddhism.

Question: But from the Buddhist point of view, would the person who had a good heart and was vegetarian be better than the person who had a good heart but was a meat eater?
Answer: If a good-hearted vegetarian's motive in avoiding meat was concern for animals and not wanting to be involved in the cruelty of modern industrial farming, then he or she would definitely have developed their compassion and their concern for others to a higher degree than the meat eater would have. Many people find that as they develop in the Dhamma that they have a natural tendency to move towards vegetarianism.

Question: Someone told me that the Buddha died from eating spoiled pork. Is that true?
Answer: No it is not. The scriptures mention that the Buddha's last meal consisted of a dish called *sukara maddava.* The meaning of this term is no longer understood but the word sukara means a pig so it may refer to a preparation of pork although it might just as easily refer to a type of

vegetable, a pastry or something else. Whatever it was, the mention of this food has led some people to think that eating it caused the Buddha's death. The Buddha was 80 at the time he passed away and he has been ailing for some time. The reality is that he died of old age.

9. Good Luck And Fate

Question: What did the Buddha teach about magic and fortune telling?
Answer: He considered such practices as fortune telling, wearing magic charms for protection, fixing lucky sites for building and fixing lucky days to be useless superstitions and he expressly forbid his disciples to practice such things. He called all these things 'low arts'. He says;

> *'Whereas some religious men, while living of food provided by the faithful, make their living by such low arts, such wrong means of livelihood as palmistry, divining by signs, interpreting dreams… bringing good or bad luck… picking the lucky site for a building, the monk Gotama refrains from such low arts, such wrong means of livelihood.'* D.I,9-12

Question: Then why do people sometimes practice such things and believe in them?
Answer: Because of greed, fear and ignorance. As soon as people understand the Buddha's teachings they realize that a pure heart can protect them much better than bits of paper, scraps of metal and a few chanted words and they no longer rely on such things. In the teachings of the Buddha, it is honesty, kindness, understanding, patience, forgiveness, generosity, loyalty and other good qualities that truly protect you and give you true prosperity.

Question: But some lucky charms do work, don't they?
Answer: I know a person who makes a good living selling lucky

charms. He claims that his charms can give good luck, prosperity and he guarantees that you will be able to predict winning lottery numbers. But if what he says is true then why isn't he himself a millionaire? If his lucky charms really work, then why doesn't he win the lottery week after week? The only luck he has is that there are people silly enough to buy his magic charms.

QUESTION: Then is there such a thing as luck?
ANSWER: The dictionary defines luck as 'believing that whatever happens, either good or bad, to a person in the course of events is due to chance, fate or fortune.' The Buddha denied this belief completely. Everything that happens has a specific cause or causes and there must be some relationships between the cause and the effect. Becoming sick, for example, has specific causes. One must come into contact with germs and one's body must be weak enough for the germs to establish themselves. There is a definite relationship between the cause (germs and a weakened body) and the effect (sickness) because we know that germs attack the organisms and give rise to sickness. But no relationship can be found wearing a piece of paper with words written on it and being rich or passing examinations. Buddhism teaches that whatever happens does so because of a cause or causes and not due to luck, chance or fate. People who are interested in luck are always trying to get something – usually more money and wealth. The Buddha teaches us that it is far more important to develop our hearts and minds. He said:

> *'Being deeply learned and skilled, being well-trained and using well-spoken words; this is the best good luck. To support your mother and father, to cherish your spouse and child and to have a simple livelihood; this is the best good luck. Being generous, just, helping your relatives and being blameless in one's actions; this is the best good luck. To refrain from evil and from strong drink and to be always steadfast in virtue; this is the best good luck. Reverence, humility, contentment, gratitude and hearing the good Dhamma; this is the best good luck.'* Sn.261-6

10. Monks and Nuns

Question: The monastic institution is an important one in Buddhism. What is the purpose of monks and nuns and what are they supposed to do?
Answer: The Buddha's purpose in founding an order of monks and nuns was to provide an environment in which spiritual development would be easier. The lay community provide monks and nuns with their basic needs – food, clothing, shelter, and medicine – so they can devote their time to the study and practice of the Dhamma. The ordered and simple lifestyle of the monastery is conducive to inner peace and meditation. In return, monks and nuns are expected to share what they know with the community and act as an example of how the good Buddhist should live. In actual practice this basic mission has sometimes been extended far beyond what the Buddha originally intended and today monks and nuns sometimes act as school teachers, social workers, artists, doctors and even politicians. Some have argued that taking such roles is alright if it helps to promote Buddhism. Others point out that by doing such things monks and nuns too easily get entangled in worldly problems and forget the purpose why they went to the monastery in the first place.

Question: Do you have to be monk or a nun to be enlightened?
Answer: Of course not. Some of the Buddha's most accomplished disciples were lay man and women. Some were spiritually developed enough to instruct the monks. In Buddhism the level of one's understanding is the most important thing and that has nothing to do with whether one wears a yellow robe or blue jeans, or whether one lives in a monastery or a home. Some might find the monastery, with all its advantages and disadvantages to be the best environment in which to grow spiritually. Others may find the home with all its joys and sorrows, to be best. Everyone is different.

Question: Why do Buddhist monks and nuns wear a yellow robe?
Answer: When the ancient Indians looked into the jungle they could always tell which leaves were about to drop from the tree, because the

were either yellow, orange or brown. Consequently, in India, yellow became the color of renunciation. Monk and nun robes are yellow so they can act as a constant reminder of the importance of not clinging, of letting go, of giving up.

Question: What is the purpose of monks and nuns shaving their heads?
Answer: Normally we are very concerned about our appearance, especially our hair. Women consider a good hairdo to be very important and men are quite concerned about going bald. Keeping our hair looking good takes up a good deal of time. In shaving their heads monks and nuns give themselves more time for the things that really matter. Also, a shaved head symbolized the idea of paying more attention to inward change than outward appearance.

Question: Becoming a monk is all very well but what would happen if everyone became a monk?
Answer: One could ask the same thing about any vocation. 'Becoming a dentist is all very well but what would happen if everyone became a dentist? There'd be no teachers, no cooks, no taxi drivers.' 'Becoming a teacher is all very well but what would happen if everyone became a teacher? There'd be no dentist, etc. etc.' The Buddha did not suggest that everyone should become a monk or a nun and indeed that is never going to happen. However, there will always be people who are attracted to life of simplicity and renunciation and who take delight in the Buddha's teaching above all else. And like dentist and teachers they have special skills and knowledge that can be helpful to the community in which they live.

Question: That might be so with those who teach, write books or do social work. But what about the monks and nuns who do nothing but meditates. What good are they to the community?
Answer: You might compare the meditating monk to the research scientist. Society supports the research scientist as he sits in his laboratory conducting experiments because it hopes that he will eventually discover or invent something that will be for the general good. Likewise, the Buddhist community supports the meditating monks (and his needs

are very meager) because it hopes that he will attain wisdom and insights that will be for the general good. But even before this happens or even if it doesn't, the meditating monks can still benefit others. In some modern societies it is 'The Lifestyle of the Rich and Famous' with its extravagance, its conspicuous consumption and its self-indulgence which is held up as the ideal to follow, or at least to envy. The example that the meditating monk sets reminds us that one doesn't have to be rich to be content. It shows us that a gentle and simple lifestyle has its advantages too.

Question: I have heard that there are no more Buddhist nuns. Is this true?
Answer: The Buddha founded the order of nuns during his lifetime and for five or six hundred years, nuns played an important role in the spread and development of Buddhism. But for reasons that are not clear nuns never commanded the same esteem or got the same support, as monks and in India and Southeast Asia the order died out. However, in Taiwan, Korea and Japan the order of nuns has continued to flourish. Today in Sri Lanka steps are being taken to reintroduce the order of nuns from Taiwan although some traditionalists are not very enthusiastic about this. However, in keeping with the Buddha's original intention, it is only right that women as well as men have the opportunity to live the monastic life and benefit from it.

11. The Buddhist Scriptures

Question: Nearly all religions have some kind of holy writings or Bible. What is the Buddhist holy book?
Answer: The sacred book of Buddhism is called the Tipitaka. It is written in an ancient Indian language called Pali which is very close to the language that the Buddha himself spoke. The Tipitaka is a very large book. The English translation of it takes up nearly 40 volumes.

Question: What does the name Tipitaka mean?

Answer: It is made up of two words, *'ti'* means 'three' and *'pitaka'* means 'baskets'. The first part of the name refers to the fact that the Buddhist scriptures consist of three sections. The first section, called the Sutta Pitaka contains all the Buddha's discourses as well as some by his enlightened disciples. The type of material in the Sutta Pitaka is very diverse which allows it to communicate the truths that the Buddha taught to different types of people. Many of the Buddha's discourses are in the form of sermons while others are in the form of dialogues. Other parts like the Dhammapada present the Buddha's teachings through the medium of poetry. The Jatakas, to take another example, consists of delightful stories in which the main characters are often animals. The second section of the Tipitaka is the Vinaya Pitaka. This contains the rules and procedures for monks and nuns, advice on monastic administration and procedure and the early history of the monastic order. The last section is called the Abhidhamma Pitaka. This is a complex and sophisticated attempt to analyze and classify all the constituents that make up the individual. Although the Abhidhamma is somewhat later than the first two section of the Tipitaka it contains nothing that contradicts them.

Now for the word 'pitaka.' In ancient India construction workers used to move building materials from one place to another by means of a relay of baskets. They would put the baskets on their heads, walk some distance to the next worker, pass it to them, and he would repeat the process. Writing was known in the Buddha's time but as a medium it was considered less reliable than the human memory. A book could rot in the monsoon damp or be eaten by white ants but a person's memory could last as long as they lived. Consequently, monks and nuns committed all the Buddha's teachings to memory and passed it on to each other just as construction workers passed earth and bricks to each other in baskets. This is why the three sections of the Buddhist scriptures are called baskets. After being preserved in this manner for several hundred years the Tipitaka was finally written down in about 100 BC in Sri Lanka.

Question: If the scriptures were preserved in memory for so long they must be very unreliable. Much of the Buddha's teachings could have been lost or changed.

Answer: The preservation of the scriptures was a joint effort by the community of monks and nuns. They would meet together at regular intervals and chant parts or all of the Tipitaka. This made it virtually impossible for anything to be added or changed. Think of it like this. If a group of a hundred people know a song by heart and while they are all singing it one gets a verse wrong or tries to insert a new verse, what will happen? The sheer number of those who know the song correctly will prevent the odd one from making any changes. It is also important to remember that in those days there were no televisions, newspapers or advertising to distract and clutter the mind which, together with the fact that monks and nuns meditated, meant that they had extremely good memories. Even today, long after books have come into use, there are still monks who can recite the whole Tipitaka by heart. The monk Mengong Sayadaw of Burma is able to do this and he is mentioned in the *Guinness Book of Records* as having the world's best memory.

Question: How important are the scriptures to Buddhists?
Answer: Buddhists do not consider the Tipitaka to be a divine infallible revelation from a god, every word of which they must believe. Rather, it is a record of the teaching of a great man that offers explanations, advice, guidance and encouragement and which should read thoughtfully and respectfully. Our aim should be to understand what the Tipitaka teaches, not just believe it and thus what the Buddha says should always be checked against our experience. You might say that the informed Buddhist's attitude to the scriptures is similar to a scientist's attitude to research papers in a scientific journal. A scientist conducts an experiment and then publishes his or her findings and conclusions in a journal. Other scientists will read the paper and treat it with respect but they will not consider it valid and authoritative until they have conducted the same experiment and got the same results.

Question: Before you mentioned the Dhammapada. What is that?
Answer: The Dhammapada is one of the smallest works in the first sections of the Tipitaka. The name could be translated as 'The Way of Truth' or 'Verses of Truth'. It consists of 423 verses, some pithy, some

profound, some containing appealing similes, others of considerable beauty, all spoken by the Buddha. Consequently the Dhammapada is the most popular piece of Buddha literature. It has been translated into most major languages and is recognized as one of the masterpieces of world religious literature.

QUESTION: Someone told me that you should never put a copy of the scriptures on the floor or under your arm, but that it should be placed in a high place. Is it true?
ANSWER: Until recently in Buddhist countries as in medieval Europe, books were rare and valuable objects. Therefore the scriptures were always treated with great respect and the custom you have just mentioned is an example of this. However, while customs and traditional practices are alright, most people today would agree that the best way to respect the Buddhist scriptures would be to practice the teachings they contain.

QUESTION: I find it difficult to read the Buddhist scriptures. They seem long, repetitious and boring.
ANSWER: When we open a religious scripture we expect to read words of exaltations, joy or praise that will uplift and inspire us. Consequently, someone reading the Buddhist scriptures is likely to be a bit disappointed. While some of the Buddha's discourses contain considerable charm and beauty, most resemble philosophical thesis with definitions of terms, carefully reasoned arguments, detailed advice on conduct or meditation and precisely stated truths. They are meant to appeal more to the intellect than to the emotions. When we stop comparing the Buddhist scriptures with those of other religions we will see that they have their own kind of beauty – the beauty of clarity, of depth and of wisdom.

QUESTION: I read that the Buddhist scriptures were originally written on the leaves of palm trees. Why was this done?
ANSWER: At the time the scriptures were written paper had not been invented in India or Sri Lanka. Ordinary documents like letters, contracts, accounts and deeds were written either on animal skins, thin metal sheets or palm leaves. Buddhists didn't like to use animal skins and writing the scriptures on metal sheets would have been both

expensive and cumbersome and so palm leaves were used. After the leaves were specially prepared they were bound together with string and put between two wooden covers making them convenient and durable, just like a modern book. When Buddhism came to China the scriptures were written on silk or paper. About 500 years later the need to produce many copies of the scriptures led to the invention of printing. The world's oldest printed books is a Chinese translation of one of the Buddha's discourses published in 828 CE.

12. History and Devolopment

Question: Buddhism is now the religion of a large number of people in many different countries. How did this happen?
Answer: Within a 150 years of the Buddha's passing his teachings had already spread fairly widely through northern India. Then in about 262 BCE the then emperor of India, Asoka Mauriya, converted to Buddhism and spread the Dhamma throughout his entire realm. Many people were attracted by Buddhism's high ethical standards and particularly by its opposition of the Hindu caste system. Asoka also convened a great council and then sent missionary monks to neighboring countries and even as far as Europe. The most successful of these missions was the one that went to Sri Lanka. The Island became Buddhist and has remained so ever since. Other missions brought Buddhism to southern and western India, Kashmir and what is now southern Burma and peninsular Thailand. A century or so after this Afghanistan and the mountainous regions of northern India became Buddhist and monk and merchants from there gradually took the religion into central Asia and finally to China from where it later penetrated into Korea and Japan. It is interesting to note that Buddhism is really the only foreign system of thought that has ever taken root in China. In about the 12th century Buddhism became the dominant religion of Burma, Thailand, Laos and Cambodia due mainly to the efforts of monks from Sri Lanka.

Question: How and when did Tibet become Buddhist?
Answer: In about the about the 8th century the king of Tibet sent

an ambassador to India to bring monks and Buddhist scriptures to his country. Buddhism caught on but did not became the major religion due partly to opposition from the priests of the indigenous Bon religion. Finally, in the 11th century a large numbers of Indian monks and teachers came to Tibet and the religion became firmly established. Since that time Tibet has been one of the most fervently Buddhist countries.

Question: So Buddhism spread very widely.
Answer: Not only that, there are very few instances of Buddhism persecuting the religions it encountered as it spread or of it being spread by conquering armies. Buddhism has always been a gentle way of life and the idea of using force or pressure to induce belief is repugnant to Buddhists.

Question: What influence did Buddhism have on the countries it went to?
Answer: When missionary monks went to different countries they usually took more than just the Buddha's teachings with them, they also brought some of the best aspects of Indian civilization. Monks were sometimes skilled in medicine and introduced new medical ideas into areas where they had not existed before. Neither Sri Lanka, Tibet nor several regions of central Asia had writing until monks introduced it and of course with writing came new knowledge and ideas. Before the coming of Buddhism the Tibetans and the Mongolians were a wild unruly people and Buddhism made them gentle and civilized. Even within India animal sacrifice went out of vogue because of Buddhism and the caste system became less harsh, at least for a while. Even today as Buddhism spreads in Europe and America modern Western psychology is starting to be influenced by some of its insights into the human mind.

Question: Why did Buddhism die out in India?
Answer: No one has ever given a satisfactory explanation for this unfortunate development. Some historians say that Buddhism became so corrupt that people turned against it, others say that it adopted too many Hindu ideas and gradually became indistinguishable from Hinduism.

Another theory is that monks began to congregate in large monasteries supported by the kings and that this alienated them from the ordinary people. Whatever the reasons, by the 8th or 9th centuries Indian Buddhism was already in serious decline. It disappeared completely during the chaos and violence of the Islamic invasion of India in the 13th century.

QUESTION: But there are still some Buddhists in India aren't there?
ANSWER: There are and indeed since the middle of the 20th century Buddhism has started to grow in India again. In 1956 the leader of India's untouchables converted to Buddhism because he and his people suffered so badly under the Hindu caste system. Since then about 8 million people have become Buddhist and the numbers continue to grow.

QUESTION: When did Buddhism first come to the West?
ANSWER: The first Westerners to become Buddhists were probably the Greeks who migrated to India after the invasion of Alexander the Great in the 3rd century BCE. One of the most important ancient Buddhist books, the Milindapanha, consists of a dialogue between the Indian monk Nagasena and the Indo-Greek king Milinda. But in recent times Buddhism started to attract admiration and respect in the West towards the end of the 19th century when scholars began translating Buddhist scriptures and writing about Buddhism. By the early 1900's a few Westerners were calling themselves Buddhists and one or two even became monks. Since the 1960's the number of Westerner Buddhists has grown steadily and today they make up a small but significant minority in most Western countries.

QUESTION: Can you say something about the different types of Buddhist?
ANSWER: At its height Buddhism stretched from Mongolia to the Maldives, from Balkh to Bali and thus it had to appeal to people of many different cultures. Further, it endured for many centuries and had to adopt and adapt as people's social and intellectual life developed. Consequently while the essence of the Dhamma remained the same

its outward form changed greatly. Today there are three main types of Buddhism – Theravada, Mahayana and Vajrayana.

Question: What is Theravada?
Answer: The name Theravada means The Teachings of the Elders and is based mainly on the Pali Tipitaka, the oldest and most complete record of the Buddha's teachings. Theravada is a more conservative and monastic-centered form of Buddhism which emphasizes the basics of the Dhamma and tends to take a more simple and austere approach. Today Theravada is practiced mainly in Sri Lanka, Burma, Thailand, Laos and Cambodia.

Question: What is Mahayana Buddhism?
Answer: By about the 1st century BCE some of the implications of the Buddha's teachings were being explored more deeply. Also, society was developing and this required new and more revenant interpretations of the teachings. The many schools that grew out of these new developments and interpretations were collectively called Mahayana, meaning The Great Way, because they claimed to be revenant to everyone, not just to monks and nuns who had renounced the world. Mahayana eventually became the dominant form of Buddhism in India and today is practiced in China, Korea, Taiwan, Vietnam and Japan. Some Theravadins say that Mahayana is a distortion of the Buddha's teachings. However, Mahayanists point out that the Buddha accepted change as one of the most fundamental of all truths and that their interpretation of Buddhism is no more a distortion of the Dhamma than an oak tree is a distortion of an acorn.

Question: I have often seen the term Hinayana. What does this term mean?
Answer: When Mahayana was developing it wanted to distinguish itself from the earlier schools of Buddhism so it called itself Mahayana, the Great Way, and dubbed the earlier schools Hinayana, meaning the Little Way. Therefore, Hinayana is a somewhat sectarian term that Mahayanists give to Theravadins.

Question: What about Vajrayana?
Answer: This type of Buddhism began to emerge in India in the 6th and 7th centuries CE at a time when Hinduism was undergoing a major revival in India. In response to this some Buddhists were influenced by aspects of Hinduism especially the worship of deities and the use of elaborate rituals. In the 11th century Vajrayana became well established in Tibet where it underwent further developments. The word Vajrayana means the Diamond Way and refers to the supposedly unbreakable logic that Vajrayanists used to justify and defend some of their ideas. Vajrayana relies more on a type of literature called tantras than on the traditional Buddhist scriptures and therefor is sometimes also known as Tantrayana. Vajrayana now prevails in Mongolia, Tibet, Ladakh, Nepal, Bhutan and amongst Tibetans living in India.

Question: This could all be very confusing. If I want to practice Buddhism how can I know which type to choose?
Answer: Perhaps we could compare it to a river. If you went to the source of a river and then to its mouth they would probably look very different. But if you followed the river from its source, as it wound its way through hills and dales, over waterfalls, past the numerous small streams that flowed into it, you would eventually arrive at its mouth and understand why it seemed to be so different from the source. If you wish to study Buddhism start with the earliest basic teachings – the Four Noble Truths, the Noble Eightfold Path, the life of the historical Buddha and so on. Then study how and why these teachings and ideas evolved and then focus on that approach to Buddhism that appeals to you most. Then it will be impossible for you to say that the source of the river is inferior to the mouth or that the mouth it a distortion of the source.

13. Becoming a Buddhist

Question: What you said so far is very interesting to me. How do I become a Buddhist?
Answer: Once there was a man called Upali who was impressed by the Buddha's teachings and decided to become one of his disciple.

But the Buddha said to him:

> *'Make a proper investigation first Upali. Proper investigation is good for a well-known person like yourself.'* M.II,379

In Buddhism, understanding is the most important thing and understanding takes time, it is the end product of a process. So do not impulsively rush into Buddhism. Take your time, ask questions, consider carefully and then make your decision. The Buddha was not interested in having large numbers of disciples. He was concerned that people should follow his teachings as a result of a careful investigation and consideration of facts.

QUESTION: If I have done this and I find the Buddha's teachings acceptable, what would I do then if I wanted to become a Buddhist?
ANSWER: It would be best to join a good temple or Buddhist group, support them, be supported by them and continue to learn more about Buddha's teachings. Then, when you are ready, you would formally become a Buddhist by taking the Three Refuges.

QUESTION: What are the Three Refuges?
ANSWER: A refuge is a place where people go when they are distressed or when they need safety or security. There are many types of refuge. When people are unhappy, they take refuge with their friends. The Buddha said:

> *'To take refuge in the Buddha,*
> *the Dhamma and the Sangha and*
> *to see with real understanding*
> *the Four Noble Truths,*
> *suffering, the cause of suffering,*
> *the transcending of suffering and*
> *the Noble Eightfold Path that leads*
> *to the transcending of suffering,*
> *This indeed is a safe refuge,*
> *this is the refuge supreme.*
> *This is the refuge whereby one is*
> *freed from all suffering.'* Dp. 189-192

Taking refuge in the Buddha is a confident acceptance of the fact one can become fully enlightened and perfected just as the Buddha was. Taking Refuge in the Dhamma means understanding the Four Noble Truths and basing one's life on the Noble Eightfold Path. Taking Refuge in the Sangha means looking for support, inspiration and guidance from all who walk the Noble Eightfold Path. Doing this, one becomes a Buddhist and thus takes the first step on the path towards Nirvana.

Question: What changes have taken place in your life since you first took the three refuges?
Answer: Like countless millions of others over the last 2500 years, I have found that the Buddha's teachings have made sense out of a difficult world. They have given meaning to what was meaningless life. They have given me a humane and compassionate ethics with which to lead my life and they have shown me how I can attain a state of purity and perfection in the next life. A poet in ancient India once wrote of the Buddha:

> *'To go to him for refuge, to sing his praise, to do him honor and to abide in his Dhamma is to act with understanding.'*

I agree with these words completely.

Question: I have a friend who is always trying to convert me. I am not really interested in his religion and I have told him so but he won't leave me alone. What can I do?
Answer: The first thing you must understand is that this person is not really your friend. A true friend accepts you as you are and respect your wishes. I suspect that this person is merely pretending to be your friend so he can convert you. When people try to impose their will on you they are certainly not friends.

Question: But he says he wants to share his religion with me.
Answer: To share your religion with others is a good thing but I suggest that your friend doesn't know the difference between sharing and imposing. If I have an apple, I offer you half and you accept my offer,

then I have shared with you. But if you say to me 'Thank you, but I have already eaten' and I keep insisting that you take half the apple until you finally give in to my pressure, this can hardly be called sharing. People like your 'friend' try to disguise their bad behavior by calling it 'sharing', 'love' or 'witnessing.' But by whatever name they call it, their behavior is still just rude, bad mannered and selfish.

Question: So how can I stop him?
Answer: It is simple. Firstly, be clear in your mind what you want. Secondly, clearly and briefly tell him so. Thirdly, when he asks you questions like 'What is your belief on this matter' or 'Why don't you wish to come to the meeting with me,' clearly, politely and persistently repeat your first statement. 'Thank you for the invitation but I would rather not come.'

'Why not.'

'That is really my business. I would rather not come.'

'There will be many interesting people there.'

'I am sure there will be but I would rather not come.'

'I am inviting you because I care about you.'

'I am glad you care about me but I would rather not come.'

If you clearly, patiently and persistently repeat yourself and refuse to allow him to get you involved in a discussion, he will eventually give up. It is a shame that you have to do this, but it is very important for people to learn that they cannot impose their beliefs or wishes upon others.

Question: Should Buddhists try to share the Dhamma with others?
Answer: Yes they should. If people ask you about Buddhism, tell them. You can even tell them about the Buddha's teachings without their asking. But if, by either their words or their actions, they let you know that they are not interested, accept that and respect their wishes. It is also important to remember that you let people know about the Dhamma far more effectively through your actions than through preaching to them. Show people the Dhamma by always being considerate, kind, tolerant, upright and honest. Let the Dhamma shine forth through your speech and actions. If each of us, you and I, know the Dhamma thoroughly,

practice it fully and share it generously with others, we can be of great benefit to ourselves and others also.

14. Some Sayings of The Buddha

Wisdom is purified by virtue and virtue is purified by wisdom. Where there is one there is always the other. The virtuous person has wisdom and the wise person has virtue. A combination of the two is called the highest thing in the world. D.I,84

The mind proceeds all things, the mind dominates them, they are all mind-made. If a person speaks or acts with a pure mind happiness will follow them like a shadow that never leaves. Dp.2

One should not blame another or despise anyone anywhere for any reason. Do not wish pain on another out of either anger of rivalry. Sn.149

Just as the great ocean has but one taste, the taste of salt, so too this Dhamma has but one taste, the taste of freedom. Ud.56

It is easy to see the faults of others but it is hard to see one's own. While winnowing others faults like chaff we hide our own like a hunter concealing himself in a hide. Those who look to others faults only get irritable. Their negativities grow and are far from being destroyed. Dp.252-3

Many garlands can be made from a heap of flowers. Likewise, many good deeds can be done by one born human. Dp.53

When you speak to others you might speak at the right time or the wrong time, according to the facts or not, gently or harshly, to the point or not, with a mind full of hate or full of love. You should train yourselves like this. 'Our minds shall not be perverted nor shall we speak evil speech but with kindness and compassion we will live with a mind

free from hatred and filled with love. We will live suffusing firstly one person with love and starting with them suffuse the whole world with a love that is expansive, pervasive, immeasurable and utterly devoid of hatred or enmity.' This is how you should train yourselves. M.I,126

It is by three things that the wise person can be recognized. What three? He sees his own faults as they are, on seeing them he tries to correct them, when others acknowledge their faults he forgives them. A.I,103

Cease to do evil, learn to do good, purify the mind. This is the teaching of the Buddhas. Dp.183

Learn this from the waters. In mountain clefts and chasms loud gush the streamlets. But great rivers flow silently. Empty things make a noise, the full is always quiet. The fool is like a half-filled pot, the wise person like a deep still pool. Sn.720-1

Even if low-down criminals were to cut you limb from limb with a double-handled saw, if you filled your mind with hatred you would not be practicing my teachings. M.I,126

If one is jealous, selfish or dishonest they are unattractive despite their eloquence and good features. But the person who is purged of such things and is free from hatred, it is he or she who is really beautiful. Dp.262-3

It is impossible that a person who is not themselves restrained, disciplined or satisfied could restrain, discipline or satisfy others. But it is very possible that one who has restrained, disciplined and satisfied themselves could help others become like that. M.I,45

Contentment is the greatest wealth. Dp.227

If others criticize me, the Dhamma or the Sangha you should not get

angry or resentful because that would cloud your judgment and you would not know whether what they said was right and wrong. If others do this explain to them how their criticism is incorrect, saying, 'This is not correct. That is not right. This is not our way. That is not what we do.' Likewise, if others praise me or the Dhamma or the Sangha you should not get proud or puffed up because that would cloud your judgment and you would not know whether what they said was right and wrong. So if others do this explain to them how their praise is justified, saying, 'This is correct. That is right. This is our way. That is found in us.' D.I,3

If words have five marks they are not ill-spoken but well-spoken, laudable and praised by the wise. What five? They are spoken at the right time, they are true, they are spoken with gentleness, they are to the point and they are spoken with love. A.III,243

Just as a deep lake is clear and still, even so the wise become utterly peaceful when they hear the teachings. Dp.82

Of little importance is the loss of such things as wealth but it is a terrible thing to loose wisdom. Of little importance is the gaining of such things as wealth but it is a wonderful thing to gain wisdom. A.I,15

If the heedless person recites the sacred text but does not apply what they say, they are like a cowherd counting someone else's cows, they will not enjoy the benefits of the holy life. Dp.19

Just as a mother protects her only child even at the risk of her own life, so too, one should have unbounded love to all beings in the world. Sn.150

One who wants to admonish another should first ponder like this; 'Am I or am I not one how practices complete purity in body and speech? Are these qualities present in me or not?' If they are not there will no doubt be those who say; 'Come now, why don't you practice complete

purity in body and speech first?' Again one who wants to admonish another should first ponder like this; 'Have I freed myself from ill will and developed love towards others. It this quality present in me or not?' If they are not there will no doubt be those who say; 'Come now, why don't you practice love yourself? A.V,79

Whoever practices righteousness in the morning, at noon or at night, they will have a happy morning, a happy noon and a happy night. A.I,294

If anyone abuses you, hits you, throws stones at you or strikes you with a stick or a sword, you must put aside all worldly desires and considerations and think, 'My heart will not be moved. I shall speak no evil words. I will feel no resentment but maintain kindness and compassion for all beings.' You should think like this. M.I,126

Irrigators lead the water, fletchers bend the shaft, carpenters shape the wood, the wise mold themselves. Dp.80

There are four types of people found in the world. What four? Those concerned with neither their own welfare or the welfare of others, those concerned with the welfare of others but not their own, those concerned with their own welfare but not that of others and those who are concerned with both their own welfare and the welfare of others… Of there four types of people those who are concerned with there own welfare and the welfare of others are the chief, the highest, the topmost and the best. A.II,94

If you take refuge in the Buddha, the Dhamma and the Sangha you will be free from fear and trembling. S.I,220

Conquer hate with love, evil with good, meanness with generosity and lies with truth. Dp.223

Those whose thoughts, speech and actions are good are their own best friend. Even if they say, 'We do not care about ourselves' they are still

their own best friend. And why? Because they do for themselves what a friend would do for them. S.I,71

Do not think lightly of goodness saying, 'I can not be like that.' A drop at a time is the water pot filled and likewise little by little do the wise fill themselves with good. Dp.122

Now at that time a certain monk was suffering from dysentery and lay where he had fallen in his own excrement. The Lord and Ananda were visiting the lodgings and they came to where the sick monk was and the Lord asked him; 'Monk, what is wrong with you?'

'I have dysentery, Lord.'

'Is there no one to look after you?'

'No Lord.'

'Then why don't the other monks look after you?'

'Because I am of no use to them.'

Then the Lord said to Ananda; 'Go and fetch water and we will wash this monk.' So Ananda brought water and the Lord pored it while Ananda washed the monk all over. Then taking the monk by the head and feet they carried him and laid him on a bed. Later the Lord called the monks together and asked them; 'Why did you not look after that sick monk?'

'Because he was of no use to us.'

'Monks, you have no mother or father to take care of you. If you do not look after each other, who else will? He who would nurse me let him nurse the sick.' Vin.IV,301

The gift of truth excels all other gifts. Dp.354

It is good from time to time to think about your own faults. It is good from time to time to think about the faults of others. It is good from time to time to think your own virtues. It is good from time to time to think about the virtues of others. A.V,159

Those who do good rejoice now, they rejoice later, they rejoice both

now and later. They rejoice and are happy when they think of their own good deeds. Dp.16

Give up wrong. It can be done. If it were impossible I would not ask you to do so. But it is possible and therefor I say, 'Give up wrong.' If giving up wrong led to your loss and sorrow I would not ask you to do so. But it will be for your welfare and happiness and therefor I say, 'Give up wrong.' Nourish the good. It can be done. If it were impossible I would not ask you to do so. But it is possible and therefor I say, 'Nourish the good.' If nourishing the good led to your loss and sorrow I would not ask you to do so. But it will enhance your welfare and happiness and therefor I say, 'Nourish the good.' A.I,58

All tremble at punishment, life is dear to all. Therefore, put yourself in the place of others and neither kill nor condone killing. Dp.130

Like the Himalayas, the good shine from afar. Like an arrow shot into the night, the bad are obscure. Dp.304

The Lord said; 'What do you think about this? What is the purpose of a mirror?'

'It is for the purpose of reflection,' replied Rahula.

Then the Lord said; 'Even so, an action should be done with body, speech or mind only after careful reflection.' M.I,415.

Just as the River Ganges flows towards, inclines towards, tends towards the east, so too, one who cultivates and develops the Noble Eightfold Path flows towards, inclines, tends towards Nirvana. S.V.40

Those who keep thinking, 'He abused me!' 'He struck me!' 'He oppressed me!' 'He robbed me!' never still their hatred. But those who let go of such thoughts will. For in this world hatred is never stilled by more hatred. It is love that stills hatred, this is an eternal truth. Dp.3-5

Abbreviations

A, Anguttara Nikaya;
D, Digha Nikaya;
Dp, Dhammapada;
M, Majjhima Nikaya;
S, Samyutta Nikaya;
Sn, Sutta Nipata;
Ud, Udana;
Vin, Vinaya.

Venerable Shravasti Dhammika was born in Australia and became a monk in India in 1976. He has lived in Sri Lanka and Singapore for many years and is the author of numerous books on Buddhism and related subjects. In this book Ven. Dhammika gives clear, thoughtful and lively answers to more than 130 commonly asked questions about Buddhism.

Some books by Shravasti Dhammika

Praised by the Wise, 1987
Good Question Good Answer, 1987 (available in Arabic, Assamese, Burmese, Bhasa Indonesia, Chinese, Hindi, Kannada, Ladakhi, Newari, Sinhala, Spanish, Tamang, Tamil and Vietnamese)
Gemstones of the Good Dhamma, 1987 (available in Hindi & Newari)
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The Buddha and His Friends, 1997
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